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ABSTRACT

Children who may appear to have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder may actually be "activity hyper" because they are asked to attend to tasks or activities inappropriate for their age or circumstances. Such preschoolers exhibit overactivity or distractibility due to a number of ecological variables such as a problem with classroom organization, ineffective routines, difficult transitions, social interactions, or a lack of fit between the child and the environment. Solutions for the activity hyper preschool child fall into three categories: classroom organization and management, the daily schedule, and the child's strengths and interests. Constant observation and anecdotal records, with careful attention to contextual variables, are necessary for designing and implementing a program to meet the individual needs of an activity hyper child. Several short large-group activity periods should be balanced with small-group or center-based learning. Preschool activity hyper children can strengthen their attention abilities by working on numerous activities relating to a theme. Another way to accommodate the child's development of attention is to consider the child's strengths and interests in planning activities. The goal should always be helping the child move toward being responsible for his own behavior. (JDD)

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Hyperactive or Activity Hyper: Intervention for the Child
with Attention Problems

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Many young children are being diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). A diagnosis of ADHD may be salient and credible for a few preschool children. However, there are children who may appear to be ADHD because they are asked to attend to tasks or activities which are not appropriate for their age or circumstances, or they may be expected to attend for too long a time when activities are appropriate for age and circumstances. These children are termed "activity" hyper (Eddowes & Aldridge, 1990) because the major contributor to their activity level is not a biological predisposition, but instead contextual/environmental impediments. Such preschoolers exhibit overactivity or distractibility due to any number of ecological variables such as a problem with classroom organization, ineffective routines, difficult transitions, social interactions, or a lack of fit between the child and the environment.

Activity hyper children are created by developmentally inappropriate settings and expectations. Drs. Maryann and Gary Manning (1981) have identified six examples of inappropriate activities for young children. These include 1) having children sit and listen in large groups for too long, 2) excessive use of worksheets or workbooks for instruction, 3) fragmenting the curriculum, 4) drilling children through memorization and pseudolearning, 5) homogeneous grouping and, 6) a heavy emphasis on testing.

Teachers of young activity hyper children consistently make three basic mistakes. First, they break tasks into small and meaningless bits and pieces to accommodate a child's limited attention. This is often counterproductive since it does nothing to help the child focus and sustain attention. Second, teachers of an activity

hyper child rob the child of developing autonomy by encouraging parents to place the child on medication, assuming that drugs will take care of the problem. This teacher behavior fails to help the child move toward developing ways of gradually becoming more responsible for one's own behavior. This brings about a third problem, which is that teachers fail to enter the child's world and find out what the child likes to do. A youngster's interests may be used to help focus and sustain attention.

Some Solutions for the Activity Hyper Preschool Child

Since the environment is a primary factor in the activity hyper child's interactions, several things can be done to address ecological variables, thus improving the child's behavior. These suggestions cluster around classroom organization and management, the daily schedule, and the child's strengths and interests.

Classroom organization and management. The general classroom environment is either conducive to or a hindrance for the development of sustained attention. While there are numerous appropriate ways to set up a classroom environment, several things should be constantly monitored to see if these are contributing in any way to producing an activity hyper child. These include the overall room arrangement, materials and location of these materials, grouping and individualization strategies, teacher expectations and behaviors, and child initiations and responses. Individual differences in child temperament and typology are important factors in determining whether the classroom organization and management system are working or not. What works for one child will not work for another. Therefore, constant observation, kidwatching, and anecdotal records, with careful attention to contextual variables are

necessary for designing and implementing a program to meet the individual needs of an activity hyper child.

The daily schedule. The daily schedule has to be carefully planned in order to accommodate the activity hyper child. To avoid fragmentation, daily activities should be balanced. Several short large group activity periods during the day should be balanced with small group or center-based learning. The daily schedule should be designed to assist all children in developing attention. A schedule which consists of short 15 minute periods all day for all types of activities does nothing to foster this development.

Children working in small groups or individually often need help, if at all possible, one on one, in the development of attention. Attention for the activity hyper child is not something that will develop automatically due to the complex nature of attention. In order to attend to a task a child must first come to attention and then select or choose that to which he will pay attention. Then sustaining attention and resisting distractors should occur. The support of the teacher through the daily schedule is necessary for accomplishing this.

One way to help preschool activity hyper children strengthen their attention abilities is to work with them through a theme or strand. For example, if the theme under class or individual investigation is "trains" then the activity hyper child can be guided through activities around this theme. The child can be directed to put together a train puzzle. Then when this is completed the child might be directed to draw a picture of a train. When this is finished, or the child's attention drifts, the child should be assisted in choosing another train activity, such as playing with a toy model of a

train. When the child's attention again dwindles, he could be directed to use the block center to make a train or tracks. Guiding the activity hyper child through activities on the same theme or strand is an initial step in developing and sustaining attention.

The child's strengths and interests. While attention does not automatically develop for the activity hyper child, many teachers notice that such a child will remain with an activity when that child is profoundly interested in what he is doing. This is another way to accommodate the child's continuing development of attention. Again, this requires considerable observation, kidwatching, and anecdotal record taking. A child's temperament and typology interact with ecological variables to produce a unique developmental pattern in each child. An environmental variable which is conducive to one child's developing attention, may be a hindrance to another. For example, time out for the extravert may work nicely in helping him remain on task during circle time or a large group activity. For the introvert, the separation from the group may not have such an effect.

As we begin to consider the child's strengths and interests, we must also take into consideration the child's previous history which has contributed to overactivity. One child may have modeled older siblings or parents' constant movements; another may be a victim of child abuse; a different child may have had little previous supervision, and still another may have come from an excessively rigid background. Failing to enter a child's world and treating all children as if they were blank slates without a previous history is a mistake which can result in activity hyper manifestations.

Finally, helping a child move toward being responsible for his own behavior should be a preschool teacher's goal in working with attention problems. This is a slow and gradual process, but the child's movement toward autonomy should always be the aim.

For too long, early intervention strategies have focused on a deficit or medical model, looking at what a child could not do, rather than considering what he can do. With this in mind, it is not enough to help children focus attention. We must value them, enter their worlds, and find out what is meaningful to them. Then we can focus our attention on what is important to them and help them become increasingly responsible for their choices, attention, and behavior.